

Dalit Women in India: A Critical Reflection

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Abstract

Indian society is a hierarchical society, where women have been facing subordination and remained marginalized, particularly the Dalit women. The term Dalit was used as a Hindi and Marathi expression for 'depressed classes'. The Britishers used this term for Scheduled Castes. The term Dalits become more popular in the last quarter of the 20th Century. In the absence of a specific definition, most of the times, scholars have been using the term as a synonymous for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. While others are using the term Dalits as a broader term which not only include the socio-cultural group as notified by the Constitution of India, but also the marginalized section of the society such as landless laborer toiling masses, workers, poor cultivators, nomadic, de-notified tribes, tribals, Buddhists and many more. In this context, the present work is a modest attempt to look into the broader meaning of Dalits. An attempt is also made to reflect upon some of the critical issues such as systematic and structural discrimination faced by Dalit women, their literacy rate, work participation rate and their engagements in activities which are basically prohibited by law such as manual scavenging, land ownership, health status, atrocities faced by them, targeted violence and other related issues. The study is based on secondary data from various national and international sources. It also deals with the national and international initiatives taken to address and overcome these huddles and bring them at the central stage of society so that they can actively and efficiently contribute in the development process of the country. At the end of the study, some of the recommendations were made for the emancipation of Dalit women in India.

India is a democratic country, adopted a socialist and secular Constitution which guaranteed social, economic and political justice, and equality of status and of opportunity to all its citizens irrespective of caste, creed and sex. No doubt, it was an uphill task for the framers of the Constitution and founders of independent India to make effective implementation in order to achieve the essence of the Constitution. There were many impediments in the way of emancipation and development of the illiterate and marginalized section of the Indian population. It became, nevertheless, more difficult for the Indian society, which is based on rigid caste system and further it remained a hierarchical society based on race, class, and gender. Many studies

reveal that the origin of caste system was in all probability racial, which basically dated back to 5000 or so years ago. It finds its roots in the Sanskrit literature. The caste system is called the *Vyavastha* and the word *varna* in Sanskrit means colour (of skin), where fair skin colour is preferred over darker skin. With the passage of time, it has subsequently developed into an altogether different form, that is based on the division of labour in the society, tune with the needs of the feudal system. Their contribution to the society in terms of labour, art and culture is enormous and resulted in great progress as observed by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nation* (Katju 2009). During the British period it turns its worst form due to the declining handicrafts and increasing unemployment and poverty. Not going into the detail discussion for the changing facets of caste system as this is not the focus of the present discussion, the basic point here under discussion is Dalit women.

In this hierarchical society, women always remain subordinated and marginalized, particularly the Dalit women. Before further pondering about critical issues and challenges faced by Dalit women and, it will be pertinent to understand who basically these Dalits are? As already mentioned above that with the course of time the concept of caste has undergone many changes, and a new term has coined in and that is Dalit.

The term Dalit was used in 1930s as a Hindi and Marathi expression for 'depressed classes'. The Britishers used this term for Scheduled Castes. The term Dalits become more popular in the last quarter of the 20th Century. In the absence of a specific definition, most of the times, scholars have been using the term as a synonymous for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

While many others are using the term dalits as a broader term which not only include the socio-cultural group as notified under Article 341 and 342 of the Constitution of India, but also the marginalized section of the society such as landless laborer toiling masses, workers, poor cultivators, nomadic, de-notified tribes, tribals, Buddhists and many more. Jyoti Lanjewar, a Marathi Dalit feminist poet rightly observed that those who fight against varna and caste system and those raise their voices against the political, social and economic oppression are the advocates of the Dalit issues.

According to International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), there are around 260 million Dalits across the globe. Dalits who often born in an innate caste system, which divide people into

unequal and hierarchical social groups, and those who are at the bottom are considered as 'inferior', 'impure' and 'polluted' to other caste groups. Such caste and class-based discrimination leads to serious violations of their social, political, economic, civil and cultural rights. It has been experienced that most of the time they have been subjected to discriminatory practices both in public and private spheres and forced to do dirty and hazardous jobs. Dalits have limited access and control over resources and services, resulted in many of them are living in poverty with miserable conditions. In spite of the Constitutional provisions and state legislations they are often excluded from decision-making and active participation in most of the spheres of public life. Hence, de facto situation of Dalits is that they have been denied equality and justice very often. (idsn.org)

In India, Dalit constitute more than 16.6 per cent of the total population according to the 2011 Census. Dalit women constitute nearly half of the Dalit population, and 16.3 of the total Indian female population of India.

Although, the 200 million SCs constitute a significant percentage of population of India, the factual number of Dalits may be much higher, as Christian and Muslim Dalits are not enumerated as 'Scheduled Castes'. According to some estimates by International Dalit Solidarity Network, there are 15-20 million Christian Dalits in India. The number of Muslim Dalits may be as high as 100 million. IDSN further reports that if these figures are to be confirmed, the number of Dalits in India could exceed 300 million, which means equivalent to a quarter of the country's population of 1.2 billion people. Since, they are not registered as SC/ST, they are not entitled for any reservations, or any other constitutional safeguards meant for SCs and STs.

Around 16 per cent of the Dalit live in urban areas and the remaining 84 per cent live in rural areas (Bhomik,2006). Even though Constitution has abolished untouchability and made a legal offence way back in 1955, still Dalits are commonly cluster together in segregated hamlets at the edge of most of the villages and urban informal settlements.

Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular not only marginalized in social domain but also have to live with low economic profile in the society, resulted in their neglect and devaluation by the society and the State, which is the manifestation of gender construction and class bias. Dalits as a constructed identity also represent an economic class as well. According to the Agricultural Census of India 2015, 71% Dalits workforce are landless labourers. Dalits operates only about 9 per cent of the total area with an average land holding of 0.78 hectares. In rural areas 54.8 per cent Dalit households do not own land at all. (agcensus.nic.in) Hence, they have to work and live at the mercy of landlords.

Most of the times, both Dalit men and women face same traditional taboos; however, Dalit women have to deal with them more often. Dalit women are discriminated against not only by people of higher castes, but also within them, by Dalit men due to the ingrained patriarchal ethos of our society to which Dalit men are no exception. So, due to intersectionality between their caste, class and gender, Dalit women became trice vulnerable. First, because of caste, second, because of their class and third, because of being woman.

It must also be noted that since, at least, quarter of century conscious efforts have been made by both academia and women activist, to raise issues of Dalit women such as atrocities and violence against them, social and economic discrimination, denial of land rights, dehumanized living and working conditions, impoverishment, malnourishment, their status of illiteracy and ignorance, social ostracism and untouchability, high cost and delay in justice delivery system, sexual abuse and subjugation in the society faced by them. Any move by Dalit women to question the systematic and structural discrimination, by challenging the prevailing inequalities or a demand to have a change in her life situation, is most of the time, retaliated with physical violence on her person as beating rape, parading naked, labeled as witches and harassed for murder or other economic crimes. This is evident from the reporting of such incidences by the newspapers and media; further it has been documented in both national reports and by international community also.

It will be pertinent over here to have a bird's eye view of Dalit women's de facto position in India with the help of available data and their major concerns. To begin with, it is an established fact that high literacy rate is crucial for attaining emancipation by any section of society and it is also an important indicator to assess the level of human development achieved by a society. The progress of any country depends on the quality of its education system. Having realized the importance of education for the development of the nation, Constitution of India provides special directions to the States to make provisions to eliminate social injustice. Article 46 affirms- "The State shall promote with special care the educational and economic interests of the weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and shall protect them from social injustice and all forms of social exploitation." In addition to this, right to education was made a Fundamental Right under Article 21A by amending the Constitution in 2002 which made it obligatory for the State to provide for free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years. Moreover, many efforts have been made by the Indian government for the universalization of education and to achieve higher rate of literacy for all sections of society including Dalits. Yet, these efforts have not been translated into reality or to

achieve the objectives and targets these programmes and policies. This is evident from the available data from the government and other well-established institutions.

According to 2011 Census, the literacy rate of Scheduled Castes is 66.1 against 54.7 in 2001; but a look at the national literacy rate for the same period reveals that it has increased from 64.8 in 2001 to 73.0 in 2011, that means the growth of literacy rate among Scheduled Castes is still slow. It is also evident that the gender gap in literacy rate of Scheduled Castes is quite high. In the absence of caste and gender segregated data particularly on poverty indicators, it is difficult to check the high dropout rate among the SCs, STs, and other socially and educationally backward classes or Dalits. In the absence of such data Dalits remain at disadvantage positions and face multiple forms of exclusion due to lack of infrastructures facilities and access to other related resources. It is also observed that their efforts, especially by girls, to access educational resources often met with violence by so called upper caste people. Hence, there is a need to make serious efforts by the government and other stakeholders to address the basic and strategic needs of the Dalits in order to achieve higher literacy among them.

It will be significant here to refer a study conducted by The Governors Research Institute in the State of Karnataka based on government data reveals that half of the total dropouts in primary school happens to be Dalit children. Report further reveals that 48 per cent of total dropouts are Dalit children and they dropout from schools within a period of two years of their enrolment in the school. (Times of India, 2014). The major reasons for dropouts for girls are either they are sharing domestic responsibilities of households including taking care of their younger siblings or because of early marriage.

This is also linked with the positioning of Dalit women in the field of employment opportunities. It has been observed that most of the Dalit women live in the conditions surrounded by vicious circle of poverty due to lack of education, skills, access and control over other productive resources. That is the reason majority of Dalit women were forced to work in the informal sector which is not regulated by any labour laws and they have to face lot of discrimination, exploitation, sexual abuse, and most of the time they are underpaid.

Moreover, Dalit women were forced to depend on dominant castes for work and their daily survival. They were compelled to do the most menial and arduous task. (Ghanshyam Shah, et al, 2006). Dalit women in rural areas are hired by the landlords to work on their agricultural fields for sowing, weeding, picking cotton and tea, transplanting paddy, harvesting, thrashing and winnowing crops, etc. and cleaning cattle sheds, animal care and other such backbreaking tasks for which they receive less than wages as compared to men for the similar work.

In urban cities and towns, they worked as domestic help, care takers of elders and children, with no fixed working hours particularly those who works as fulltime domestic helpers. Working as domestic help, they engaged in the activities like washing clothes, cleaning and mopping houses, cleaning utensils, etc. They face a lot of discrimination while working; in some households they have restricted entries and not allowed to enter kitchen or place of worship, they were not allowed to enter the house with their footwears. Separate utensils were kept for them for drinking water or tea etc. It will not be incorrect to say that a form of untouchability is still in practice in its own ways. While working in the fields and houses of the non-Dalits, Dalit women faces sexual abuse and violence. They became powerless to resist out of the fear of losing jobs which compelled them to silently submit to sexual harassment by the employers.

Another area which requires a serious contemplation is manual scavenging in which a significant number of Dalit women are still engaged. Manual scavengers are amongst the poorest and most disadvantaged community in India. India prohibited employment of people as manual scavengers, way back in 1993. Despite this prohibition, the Census of India 2011 reports that 2.6 million dry latrines are still operational in the country. There are 13,14,652 toilets where human excreta are flushed in open drains, 7,94,390 dry latrines where the human excreta are cleaned manually. Seventy-three per cent of these are in rural areas and 27 per cent are in urban areas. Considering the grave situation, in 2013, Parliament enacted another landmark legislation-The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act.

Section 2 (1) (g) of this Act defines a manual scavenger as: “(g) a person engaged or employed, at the commencement of this Act or at any time thereafter, by an individual or a local authority or an agency or a contract, for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or in such other spaces of premises, as the Central Government may notify, before the excreta fully decomposes in such manner as may be prescribed.

Despite of prohibition on manual scavenging, the cases reported in the media reveals the practice is still prevailing. Of those who are engaged in manual scavenging are 95 per cent Dalit women. Their male family members are engaged in other tasks such as disposing of dead animals, cleaning placentas after delivery, and various funeral-related activities. It is reported that a significant number of manual scavengers die every year while manually cleaning the sewage holes due to suffocation. Notwithstanding, with the efforts made by government, in accordance

with international treaties, the situation of rehabilitation of manual scavengers is still gloomy due to the lack of political will to address the issue in its wisdom.

An additional concern related to their basic human rights is the issue of save drinking water and sanitation, which is one of the basic necessities of life, yet Dalit women deprived of this fundamental right also. They were not allowed to collect the water from the public taps/wells which most of the time under the control of upper caste people, for the simple reason that water is considered as pure while social construction of Dalits relegate as polluted. Every year a notable number of murders occurs due to conflict over water collection from public sources. In case, at some places if they were allowed to collect water they have to wait for longer periods until all non-Dalits collect their water. (Shah:2006). Same is the situation with toilet amenities. As already stated, that most of Dalits live in miserable conditions due to poverty, they reside in small and semi-constructed shelters. Most of such shelters do not have indoor toilets; they also miss public toilets facilities in the dwelling areas. In the absence of toilet facilities, they are forced to relieve themselves in open space. For this they have to go in groups and either early in the morning or late in the evening that too at isolated places. Which not only make them more vulnerable for sexual violence, it effects their health, many of them suffer from chronically gastrointestinal problems and urinary and reproductive tract infections

Dalit women became more vulnerable for various forms of harassments and atrocities. They became targeted victims of heinous crimes such as rape accompanied with murder. In their daily life, they were addressed with insulting and derogatory language. Dalit women were labeled as prostitutes by others and treat them in an undignified manner by the society. This is visible the way they have been facing distress and various forms of violence in the society including verbal, physical and psychological abuse, sexual violence. It has been observed that whenever Dalits attempted to cross the conventions and customs set by the society or raised their voice against any injustice, they faced undesirable consequences and particularly their women have been targeted in a way to teach a lesson to the community. Ghanshyam Shah very rightly observed that in case of caste-based conflicts, violence often takes the form of targeting the Dalit women, to 'teaching a lesson' to Dalit men involves violating their 'property' – the bodies of Dalit women.

The National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) in its various reports reveals that there is an increase in the number of cases of physical attacks on women, which include crimes like stripping, beating, kidnapping and rapes. Reports further reveals that there is a significant increase in the number of cases of rape of Dalit women by the upper caste people year after year. In addition to this a significant number of sexual and gender-based violence survivors are Dalit girls under the

age of 18 years, and no caste segregated data is available with NCRB for child rape survivors. The actual data must be much higher, majority of the Dalit women/girls who are raped do not file the FIR or report the crime to police due to political and social pressures. Whenever, they dared to file a case their families have to face targeted violence and victimized by the perpetrators. They face social ostracism in their own village or locality and forced to move out of their own dwelling.

sometimes they were forced to settle the case out of the court by Panchayats which is most of the time dominated by landowning community or upper caste members which results in denial of justice to the survivors. Moreover, for Dalit women approaching the courts and seeking justice is an arduous task due to economic cost and time-consuming labour. It is very difficult for them to collect evidences and witness testimonies to present before the court. Very often, witnesses became hostile due to the fear of retribution and threats from the perpetrators, resulted in very low rate of conviction in such cases.

One of the major reasons responsible for such a situation of Dalit women, is their inability for active participation in decision making process at all levels. They lack in meaningful participation at grassroots and at levels of local governance due to lack of awareness regarding the procedures, limited economic resources, political nexuses and above all access to formal education. Regardless of having reservations in Panchayati Raj Institutions and Local Self Government in urban areas, Dalit women are not able to perform effectively because of non-Dalits hegemony over such institutions. They were prevented from entering polling booths for casting their votes. In case Dalits not follows the dictates of local political bosses for a particular political party or candidate, they were socially boycotted and forced to migrate from the village. When a Dalit is elected as Sarpanch from a reserved constituency s/he is often humiliated by other members. It has also been experienced that more often law enforcement agency and other state official, who are supposed to be the protectors and safeguards of the Constitution, also allied with the dominant non-Dalits. Consequently, the very basic idea of Justice and Equality guaranteed by the Constitution is defeated and it further perpetuate and reinforce systematic structural inequalities in the society.

With this backdrop, it will not be incorrect to say that the situation of Dalit women in particular and Dalits in general, even after more than seven decades of independence of our country, is very gloomy. The architects of our Constitution with their farsightedness provide special provisions in the Constitution to protect and promote the interest of Dalits under various Fundamental Rights

and also make provisions for having affirmative action to bring them at the mainstream level. In addition to this, government of India from time to time, came out with a number of legislations to safeguard the interest of Dalits in general and Dalit women in particular.

Likewise, at the international level, many Conventions and Treaties have been adopted to protect and promote the interest of Dalits and to work for the formation of egalitarian society, for instance, United Nations Charter reaffirms faith in basic human rights. Likewise, Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the recognition of the inherent dignity and equality as inalienable rights of all members of the human family. On the similar lines these commitments were further strengthened in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social, Political and Cultural Rights.

In addition to these, International Community ratified its commitments for women's human rights, by declaring Women's Decade and by holding Four World Conferences on Women. During Women's Decade 1976-1985, the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination was adopted by the UN. Added to these initiatives, World Conferences to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerances were held, and reaffirmed the duty of the member States to protect and promote the human rights and fundamental freedom of all victims with a gender perspective. For the first time in 2006, the First International Conference on Human Rights of Dalits was held with a motto – "Transform their Pain into Power" to which India is also a signatory.

All these international efforts, along with constitutional safeguards and other legislations by the government, however, have done little to get rid of the widespread evils of caste discrimination, class and gender biases from the socio-economic order.

Basically, what is needed is to have a strong social and political commitment for the emancipation of Dalit women, without which, no international or national efforts will bear any fruit. There is a need to realize that the low literacy level among Dalit women, not only in terms of economic constraints but also as social deterrent for active participation in the development process of the country.

Dalit women have been kept powerless, their voices remain unheard, their dignity and personhood trampled on. This can only be eliminated by the advancement of scientific temperament and approach, and by creating more employment opportunities for people so that everyone can have access to decent and dignified means of livelihood. This requires re-examining our education system in order to make it job oriented. Another issue which needs to ponder upon is that everyone, as equal citizens of the country, must have equal access and control over both

material and intellectual resources so that they can effectively participate in the development process. Since ours is agriculturally based economy, effective implementation of land reforms is required and land to the tillers is a precondition for sustainable agricultural development.

Indian democracy is the largest democracy of the world, where every vote has an equal value. It has been observed that our elections are becoming more and more infomercial and caste factor play a dominant role in place of development agenda of the political parties. Hence, there is a need for drastic reforms in electoral system.

Since Dalit is a constructed identity, there is a need to deconstruct it by promoting secular marriages and by giving incentives to those who marry across caste or religion. In the end, there is a need for the social movement for the deconstruction and elimination of all forms of discriminations based on caste, class and gender identities and for the establishment of 'Just' society free from inequalities and injustice. Finally, to put in the words of Gail Omvedt, there is a need to challenge and sought to transfer the basic structure of Indian social system, replacing castes and the accompanying social oppression, economic exploitation and political domination by an egalitarian society.

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